

SOME MORE CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT TEXTUAL CRITICISM

BY

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[अस्मिन् निबन्धे महाभारतस्य पाठसमीक्षात्मकसंस्करण-
माधारीकृत्य महाभारतादीनां पुराणानां च एतादृशानां संस्करणानाम-
नुपयोगित्वमप्रामाण्यं च प्रदर्शितम् । विदुष्या लेखिकाया मते मौखिक-
परम्परया प्राप्तानां विभिन्नपाठसरणीनां समानमेव महत्त्वं वर्तते अतः
परम्परागतपाठसरणीनां सांक्यं न विधेयम् । महाभारतं पुराणानि च
प्रथमं मौखिकपरम्परया प्रचारं प्राप्तानि, यस्मिन् विभिन्नस्थानेषु
विभिन्नकालेषु च बह्व्यः पाठपरंपराः संजाताः । तेषां संरक्षणमवश्यमेव
कर्तव्यम् । सर्वासां पाठसरणीनां समानान्तरमेव एकत्र पाठसमीक्षात्मकं
पृथक् पृथक् संस्करणं कर्तव्यं येन तासां सरणीनां तुलनात्मके अध्ययने
सौकर्यं स्यात् ।]

The critical editions of purāṇas which are now being prepared in Varanasi appear to be based on the same principles which were applied to the Bhandarkar Institute edition of the *Mahābhārata*. Shri A. S. Gupta, in his article "Constitution of the Vāmana Purāṇa text" (*Purāṇa*, Vasantapañcamī Number, Vol. IX. 1, Jan. 1967, pp. 141-194) deals only with the practical problems of text-reconstruction, which seems to imply that on the whole he has relied on the theoretical conclusions reached by V. S. Sukthankar in his elaborate Introduction to the first volume of the *Mahābhārata*.

In 1929 and in 1934 (*Journal Asiatique*, Oct.-Dec. 1929, pp. 345-348; Oct.-Dec. 1934, pp. 281-283), Sylvain Levi hailed the publication of the first three and the last fascicules of the *Ādi-parvan* as a great event, but at the same time he expressed some doubt as to the value of the text so reconstructed. Sukthankar in his Introduction of 1933, discarded the 1929 criticism as "a paradox natural to the subtle mentality of the learned critic", which "we need not take too seriously" (Mbh. Vol. I. p. LXXXIV). Though my mind is far from being as subtle as that of my *paramaguru*, I fell to see any Paradox in S. Levi's appraisal

of Sukthankar's work, but I would rather quote from his review of the 7th fascicule of the *Ādiparvan* (1934), which may help clarify his reasoning (p. 282): "Mr. Sukthankar, who has been trained by the pandits and by the German philologists, remains halfway between the Indian tradition and Wolff. He cannot help thinking that Vyāsa and Vaiśampāyana are historical characters, and he holds the idea of an old organic poem, which is the basis of all alterations; but he also says about this poem that it "practically never existed".

This contradiction that Sylvain Levi brought to light years ago has remained in the minds of Indians as one of the unsolved conflicts resulting from the impact of Western science. The French scholar was aware of the limits of textual criticism when applied to such monuments of oral tradition as the Indian epics, and since his time, Western scientists have become increasingly conscious of the specific problems of oral tradition (even when it is only available to us through written texts). But the Indian scholars have continued to adhere to Sukthankar's principles of method, though the latter was already fully aware, as his Introduction shows, of the difficulties of textual criticism. The reason for this is not necessarily that the modern developments of Western science are not yet known in India. It must be considered that the conception of what the western scholar calls "oral tradition" is nothing like Indian conception of oral tradition.

In the West, oral tradition refers essentially to the manner that popular beliefs, myths and legends, which were in olden days narrated by more or less skilled people, are transmitted. The narrators were not necessarily specially authorized for this activity; rather they were appreciated on the basis of their ability to tell stories. It was not expected of them to repeat faithfully a given text, which had been learnt by heart. On the contrary, a good story-teller was one who knew how to make the same old story lively and captivating, to a certain extent through the use of his own words. Only the gist of the story, its essential pattern or meaning, remained the same. Oral tradition in this sense is considered to be authorless, or rather, anonymous and

collective. As such it is in opposition to written literature, which is comprised exclusively of works composed by individual authors, whether known or unknown, and which are maintained unaltered, as far as possible, through the manuscript tradition. Since the written literature in the West is valued more highly than the oral tradition, the specific features of the latter were ignored for a long time. The rules of textual criticism were evolved for only the written literature and their main purpose was to reconstruct, out of the variations of manuscripts, the original work of an author.

But to the Indian mind, "oral tradition" has quite different connotations. On the one hand, it is the highest form of literature, a form which gives us the religious truth itself in its unalterable expression, the truth about invisible things. Actually the phrase "oral tradition" is not quite an accurate translation of the Sanskrit word *śruti*, which denotes the revealed truth received through the hearing of immutable words or sentences. The emphasis here is placed on the hearing rather than on the reciting of what has been heard. The transmission process, of course, implies a *guru* who speaks and a disciple who listens, but the correct hearing and remembering practically ends the work of the *śiṣya*. From ear to mouth of the same speaker no word should be altered; the speaker's mind should not be allowed to interfere with the received message. The Vedic text is not considered to be composed by men, but selfrevealed, and at the same time it is the perfect expression of the meaning to be expressed. Only the brahmins are fit to hear and recite it, not only because they have acquired a special skill, but also because they were born brahmins. In point of fact, however, there are several Vedic texts, though they deal essentially with the same rituals and could at least partly be brought together and reconciled. But, as they are considered immutable they are classified under different "branches" or schools and kept as they are with their variations. Even the most staunch supporters of Western textual criticism in India would never dream of "critically editing" the Vedas in the same way as the epics and the purāṇas, since they are absolutely authoritative as they are.

On the other hand, however, there is another variety of oral tradition if we mean by this phrase any form of literature which has been transmitted through the centuries primarily by oral recitation, namely, that which comes under the generic term *smṛti*. The epics and purāṇas are *smṛti* texts and, as such they have been composed by men. For this reason they are less authoritative than the *śruti*, but at the same time, they are given a definite religious normative value, provided their contents are found by the learned brahmins (that is, the brahmins who are well-versed in the *śruti* to be in agreement with the revealed truth. Hence there are a number of consequences which a modern pandit constantly keeps in mind, even when he sets to work at bringing out a critical edition : if a purāṇa is of human origin, it must have been composed by a man and that man must have been of the most authoritative kind. Vyāsa is the great-grandson of Vasiṣṭha, the very symbol of pure brahminhood. He is a *ṛṣi*, but for an Indian mind his mythic characterisation does not exclude his historical reality ; it simply keeps it out of reach. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that what we have now is not a single text with negligible variant readings, but different recension of the same work, which obviously have been evolved independently of one another to a certain extent, in different parts of India. These different recensions cannot be easily reconciled with one another, since not all of them even include the same stories, nor are they always given in the same order. The problem is quite similar for the epics and the purāṇas. In both cases the oral tradition of the last centuries has been maintained at least partially through manuscript transmission, but everybody is aware of the vast variations that occur, not only between two recensions, but also between two versions of the same recension. It cannot be concealed that the bards (usually non-brahmins) who narrated the stories partly re-created them for each recitation in the same manner as the Western bards during the Middle Ages. To a modern brahmin's mind this means unauthoritativeness, sheer fancy and hopeless separation from the pure source of wisdom.

Here in my opinion, lies the fundamental misunderstanding and the reason why Sukthankar and others have held to textual criticism in spite of all the theoretical difficulties, which they could see as clearly as we do. In using a seemingly Western scientific method, which was not meant for that kind of literature, they had in mind a purpose which could only superficially be stated in scientific terms; in fact it remained purely religious. The question whether Vyāsa was a mythic or an historical author could not even be clearly raised, since he was primarily the symbol of the authoritativeness of the epic and purāṇic texts. What was to be reached was not so much the original text as the most authoritative one, and it was hoped that the oldest possible version would come closer to the truthful version, having less intermediary transmitting agents to alter it.

This hope, of course, is not sufficient to make the methods of textual criticism applicable; Sukthankar's analysis of the critical problems of the *Mahābhārata* is proof to the contrary. Once the "fluidity" of the text has been admitted, once we have become aware of the regional and temporal variations which have resulted in different recensions and versions, we cannot be easily convinced that the shortest recension (that of Kashmir) is the best and that the oldest manuscripts, which in any case are much more recent than the beginnings of the epic traditions, are the most faithful to the assumed original. At best, to use Sylvain Levi's own terms, Sukthankar has created a new recension of the *Mahābhārata* and it is likely that in the near future we shall also have some new recensions of purāṇas. But it is not clear why these should be either better from a scientific viewpoint, or more authoritative from a traditional angle. Since the traditional Indian pandits presently seem to share in this opinion, it would seem that the target has been missed.

Let us examine the problem once again from both sides. I shall start from the traditional standpoint, since the aim of any scientific method in human sciences should be to determine the right approach to an object through an understanding of its particular setting. If we want to scientifically study some piece

of the Indian oral tradition we should not begin by focusing our attention on the changes that took place in the process of transmitting the texts, but determine for any given time, whether a particular piece of oral literature had some relation to the actual beliefs of the people and how it was understood by them. We are all the more invited to do so as the old Indian commentators did not ignore the variations in the tradition, though they were not bothered too much by them, and even made use of them.

If we compare the fate of the *Mahābhārata* to that of the Vedic texts, we find a particularly striking difference. On the one hand, the Vedic so-called "branches", which were differentiated very early but made immutable at one point, have been maintained unaltered up to the present time. For each school of each Veda there is a group of brahmins who should recite only the particular recension of the school; the text of each recension is thus related to a permanent social group and made inseparable from it. If the text disappeared, there would no longer be a basis for the distinction of the group. On the other hand, the *smṛti*-texts, which also probably in one form or other date back to a very early period, embody the entire popular lore, with occasional marked differences in the degree of brahminic orthodoxy. They were probably never exclusively in the hands of brahmins, and for centuries they have conveyed in a striking manner the beliefs and ideals of the people. Although the expression might slightly change, the essential message has remained the same. The meaning has been more important than the form, which is the very sign of a living tradition. Not only could one story vary in its details but even the number and content of stories from one recension to the other could vary as a result of their spreading over such a vast area during a period of many centuries. But the overall meaning has still been felt as one and the same.

This is why, speaking now from a scientific standpoint, we have some difficulty in agreeing with Sukthankar's poor opinion of the Vulgate edition of the *Mahābhārata*. To him this text compiled in the 17th century, is the very symbol of an unscientific mind. Instead of choosing and eliminating, Nīlakaṇṭha tried to collect all the available versions of the *Mahābhārata* and

on the basis of them all, to compose a more complete text, which Sukthankar called a "conflated" recension. Unfortunately we do not have much evidence of Nīlakaṇṭha's kind of work but we know at least that his text became very popular, from which we can assume that, at the very least, he did not assemble the stray pieces of his puzzle altogether indiscriminately; or, to put it in other words, that his *Mahābhārata* received a warmer welcome than the present critical edition. No doubt he had also sometimes to eliminate and choose, and it is obvious that he did not retain stories or details of stories which were meaningless to him. His main concern was not to give a critical edition but rather to bring out as complete a collection as possible of the epic stories that were prevalent at that time and known by everybody in one form or other. But certainly he was equally concerned with the authoritativeness of the stories, as any good brahmin should be. He was probably even more conscious of this religious requirement than the modern pandits, and his definition of the authoritativeness of the *smṛti* is likely to have been the same as that of any caste-Hindu at any time. We can at least tentatively express the traditional idea in these terms: any epic or purāṇic story is true if the local brahmins recognize it as part of their beliefs. These brahmins are the *śrūta*, the people that warrant the authority of the local tradition because they are well-versed in the *śruti*. And if such a story is recognized by the brahmins, it is attributed to Vyāsa, the mythic author of epics and purāṇas, regardless of whether it is mentioned in any of the classical texts.

I think I found something of this situation recently (Oct. 1967) when talking with the Śrīvaiṣṇava pandits of the Simhāchalam *pāṭhaśālā* in Andhra. The latter had no difficulty in admitting that the local purāṇa, which relates the story of Nara-siṃha and Prahlāda, was quite different from the *Skandapurāṇa* version of the same story, though this was the avowed source of it. In spite of this difference the local purāṇa was for them authoritative, since it expressed their belief and therefore was considered superior to any other local version. A non-brahmin Hindu, who was accompanying me at the time, tried to propose another version of the same story—that is, essentially another interpretation of the

same iconographical details, which, on closer examination, happened to be śaivite. The Śrīvaiṣṇava brahmins thought it was enough to refute it by saying that it was "a purāṇa coming from the mouth". In contradistinction, their *sthalapurāṇa* was no doubt attributed to Vyāsa just like the *Skandapurāṇa* or any other *mahāpurāṇa*. In other words, the Śrīvaiṣṇava brahmins found in themselves the real source of the authoritativeness of the story without caring too much for the real origin of the tradition in time or place. Their interpretation of the story must be eternal or at least extremely old, as old as Vyāsa himself. This way of thinking also accounts for conflicting traditions, which are not held by the same people but each of which has its authority directly grounded in the people's minds.

The modern pandits are now in the name of science trying to reverse the terms, and decide what is old enough to possibly date back to Vyāsa and use this as the basis for determining the authoritative version. They have introduced the historical dimension into the realm of myth where it cannot exist. For a long time people have been aware of differences in local recensions or traditions but it has not occurred to them that these differences should be accounted for in terms of historical change. A criterion for decision could immediately be found in their own social group-status. The modern interpretation is obviously the result of the impact of Western science, at least of the dominant trend of Western Indian studies, that is, historical philology. But the approach of historical philology will never be suitable for an oral tradition, which has no essential reference to its historical origin and which, through the centuries, has spread over a vast area without preserving its material unity. It would just be wrong to make Vyāsa the historical origin of what has no single historical origin. Of course Sukthankar was too much a part of the Indian traditional culture not to have felt this, and the difficulties in preparing a critical edition, which he listed in his Introduction, bear witness to his uneasiness. But he failed to see that these same difficulties required an altogether different scientific approach. Actually his attitude was shared by many Western scientists of the time and Sylvain Levi appears to have been one of the very few dissenting voices in the West.

The only conclusion which suggests itself is that any locally

accepted version is authoritative in its own right. It does not mean that the *Mahābhārata* or any widespread purāṇa has no unity whatever, but rather that its unity is to be found in the meaning of the stories and not in their particular contents or historical bearing. This is why the orthodox Hindu consciousness has always found it so easy to accept wide variations in the texts. Any scientific study should first of all preserve these variations and determine the kind of socio-religious idea they conveyed to people.

This is a sufficient indication of the method that should be followed in bringing out critical editions of this kind of literature. The editors up till now have concentrated on the reconstruction of a single text out of the several known recensions, but it is recognized by everybody, including the editors themselves, that such a text never existed. It never represented the actual beliefs of any particular group of people nor could it claim to stand for the minimum common beliefs of the Hindus. For this reason the main concern of the editors should be to publish not only the different recensions as they are, but also, when necessary, the different versions of each recension. It would be very useful if the different texts could be published in parallel. Each version could be "critically edited" to a certain extent, though final certainty or a completely satisfactory text is impossible due to the very conditions of oral literature. But this detailed critical work should not be mechanically compiled just on the basis of the known rules of critical editions. Though this is outside the subject of the present paper, I would suggest that the manuscript evidence be checked and strengthened through consultations with the people who, even now, have a first hand knowledge of the epics and purāṇas.

A number of questions and objections may be raised in relation to the above discussion. I purposely remained at the level of generalities to make my point clearer, but this does not mean that all practical difficulties have disappeared. It would be very interesting indeed, and certainly worthwhile, if people who have something to say in this connection cared to express their opinions.